Syria blames IS for soldier's killing on New Year's Eve

DAMASCUS: Syria said on Thursday a suicide bomber who killed a security forces member in Aleppo on New Year's Eve was in the militant Islamic State group, which planned attacks on churches and gatherings.

The IS recently increased its attacks in areas of Syria controlled by Damascus, and was blamed for an attack last month in Palmyra that killed three Americans.

The interior ministry said in a statement it had information that IS planned "suicide operations and attacks targeting New Year's celebrations in a number of governorates, particularly the city of Aleppo, by targeting churches and civilian gathering spots", prompting security to be tightened.

In Aleppo's Bab al Faraj neighbourhood, one policeman "became suspicious of a person who was later found to be affiliated with Daesh", the statement said, using the Arabic acronym for IS.

While being interrogated, the man "opened fire, resulting in the martyrdom of one of the police officers, and then he blew himself up, wounding two officers while they were trying to intervene to arrest him".

On Dec 13, two US soldiers and an American civilian were killed in an attack Washington blamed on a lone IS member in Syria's Palmyra.

In retaliation, American forces struck scores of IS targets in Syria.

According to one media report, the US strikes killed five members of the group.

Syrian authorities have also carried out several operations against IS since then, saying they had killed a senior leader of the group on Dec 25.

In November, during a visit by Syrian President Ahmed al Sharaa to Washington, Syria officially joined the US-led coalition against IS.—AFP

Thousands stage Gaza rally in Istanbul

ISTANBUL: Thousands joined a New Year rally for Gaza in Istanbul on Thursday, waving Palestinian and Turkish flags and calling for an end to the bloodshed in the tiny territory.

Demonstrators gathered in freezing temperatures under cloudless blue skies to march to the city's Galata Bridge for a rally under the slogan: "We won't remain silent, we won't forget Palestine".

More than 400 civil society organisations were present at the rally, one of whose organisers was Bilal Erdogan, the youngest son of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Police sources and Anadolou state news agency said some 500,000 people had joined the march at which there were speeches and a performance by Lebanese-born singer Maher Zain of his song *Free Palestine*.

"We are praying that 2026 will bring goodness for our entire nation and for the oppressed Palestinians," said Erdogan, who chairs the board of the Ilim Yayma Foundation, an educational charity that was one of the organisers of the march.

Turkiye has been one of the most vocal critics of the Israeli invasion of Gaza and helped broker a ceasefire in October.

But the fragile ceasefire has not stopped the violence as more than 400 Palestinians have been killed since it took hold on Oct 10.—AFP

PM's aide offers

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the PTI could instead initiate propaganda against political parties.

He further said that the PTI should withdraw its call for a wheel-jam strike on February 8, as it would be a "failure" and would further "damage the situation".

In response, Mr Dogar said the government should arrange a meeting between PkMAP chief Mahmood Khan Achakzai, MWM chief Allama Raja Nasir Abbas, and incarcerated PTI leader Imran Khan. "Hopefully, a path will be made," he added.

"If these five leaders meet, the conflict can be resolved," added Mr Dogar, without specifying which five leaders he was referring to.

The PTI has said that it will not engage in negotiations with the federal government. Party Information Secretary Sheikh Waqqas Akram said the stance was adopted in line with the instructions of party founder Imran Khan.

In December last year, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif reiterated his offer for talks with the opposition but also emphasised that dialogue between the two sides could only proceed on "legitimate matters".

At a recent national conference, organised by the TTAP alliance, participants had agreed that the door for dialogue must never be closed in a democracy. Similarly, political leaders, including ruling PML-N stalwarts, from across the spectrum called for dialogue and restraint to achieve stability in the country, saying that political confrontation was causing instability and violence.

TETIANA, a 20-year-old recruit, takes part in military training in Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region.—AFP

20 killed in drone strike on Russia-controlled region in Ukraine

MOSCOW: Russia said on Thursday Kyiv was behind a deadly drone strike on a hotel in the Moscow-held part of Ukraine's southern Kherson region that people celebrating the New Year.

The accusations come at a crunch moment after weeks of diplomacy aimed at brokering an end to the near four-year war, and as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said his country was "10 per cent" away from a peace deal.

According to a Russia-appointed governor of the Kherson region, Vladimir Saldo, "the enemy" fired three drones that "struck a cafe and hotel on the Black Sea coast in Khorly" where "civilians were celebrating the New Year".

Kyiv has not commented on the allegations.

Russia's investigative committee said it had opened a probe into the attack which had "killed more than 20 people and injured many more".

A building gutted by fire, piles of smouldering rubble and charred bodies were seen in pictures that Saldo posted on *Telegram*.

Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova accused Ukraine of carrying out a "terrorist" attack against the civilian population.

Zelensky said Russia was carrying the war "into the New Year", with more than 200 drones fired overnight, mainly targeting energy facilities.

"A significant number of consumers" were cut off power, Ukraine's power operator Ukrenergo said. Railway and port infrastructure was also damaged in the latest barrage.

New talks in sight

Ukraine came under intense pressure last year, both from Russian bombardment and on the battlefield, where it has steadily ceded ground to the Russian army.

An analysis based on Ukrainian air force data showed a slight fall in overnight Russian drone and missile attacks on Ukraine last month.

Russia fired 5,134 drones in overnight attacks in the final month of 2025, six per cent less than the month before, while the number of missiles fell by 18 per cent in the same period, according to the data.

However, the same data showed Ukraine destroyed a smaller share of the total sum of missiles and drones last month - 80 per cent, compared with 82 per cent in November.

US President Donald Trump, who regularly complains he does not receive credit as a peacemaker, has engaged in talks with both sides in a bid to end the fighting.

Kyiv says Russia is not interested in peace and is deliberately trying to sabotage diplomatic efforts aimed at ending the war to seize more Ukrainian territory.

Moscow earlier this week accused Ukraine of attempting a drone attack on one of Russian President Vladimir Putin's residences, drawing a sharp rebuttal from Kyiv who said there was no "plausible" evidence of such attack.

Ukraine's allies have also expressed scepticism about Russia's claim, but Moscow said on Thursday it would hand over to the United States "decrypted data" from the drone that was allegedly targeting the secluded residence.

"These materials will be transferred to the American side through established channels," Russia's defence ministry said in a statement.

Zelensky said on Tuesday he would hold a meeting with leaders of Kyiv's allies from the "coalition of the willing" next week in France.

The summit will be preceded by a meeting of security advisers from the allied countries on Saturday in Ukraine.—AFP

Trump says aspirin caused bruised hand, denies falling asleep

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump blamed aspirin for large bruises on his hand and denied falling asleep while attending public meetings, in an interview with *The Wall Street Journal* published on Thursday.

In the interview defending his health, the US leader also changed his previous statement about receiving an MRI scan in October, saying it was instead a quicker CT scan.

Trump, who at 79 is the oldest person to assume the US presidency, told the *Journal* "my health is perfect" and expressed frustration with scrutiny of his well-being.

Trump has based much of his political image on projecting vigour - whether through his frequent interactions with journalists, constant social media posting, or AI memes depicting him as a superhero.

However, the first year of his second term in office has raised growing questions.

His right hand shows persistent bruising, often covered with thick makeup and at times a bandage, and his ankles have appeared swollen.

On occasion, Trump has clearly struggled to keep his eyes open, including during a televised Oval Office meeting with health representatives in November, a politically sensitive issue for someone who constantly frames his Democratic predecessor Joe Biden as "sleepy".

Bruising and 'blinking'

The Republican explained the bruising on his hand as the result of aspirin that he takes daily to thin his blood. "I don't want thick blood pouring through my heart," he told the *Journal*.

He said he applies makeup or bandages when his hand is "whacked". One cut, he said, was caused when his attorney general Pam Bondi hit the back of his hand with her ring while giving him a high-five.

Explanations of his health issues have been inconsistent.

Trump himself told reporters that he underwent an MRI scan in October, but said at the time he had "no idea what they analysed".

To the *Journal*, Trump said it was not an MRI, "it was less than that. It was a scan".

Trump's doctor, Sean Barbabella, confirmed to the newspaper that a CT scan - a procedure that takes far less time than an MRI - was done "to definitively rule out any cardiovascular issues". —AFP

Kyiv says it faked death of anti-Kremlin Russian fighter

KYIV: Ukraine said on Thursday it had staged the death of an anti-Kremlin Russian fighter to prevent his killing allegedly ordered by Moscow's special forces.

Denis Kapustin, leader of the Russian Volunteer Corps that had carried out cross-border raids into Russia during Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, was killed on the front line, his group declared on Saturday.

But on Thursday Kapustin, also known as Denis Nikitin, appeared via video link at a briefing with the head of Ukrainian military intelligence, Kyrylo Budanov, who congratulated him on his "return to life".

His assassination, the agency said in a statement, "was ordered by the special services of the aggressor state Russia, which allocated half a million dollars to carry out the crime".

"As a result of a comprehensive special operation" his life "was preserved, and the circle of individuals was identified: the masterminds within the Russian special services and the perpetrators".

Kapustin "reported his readiness to continue carrying out combat and special tasks as the head of the unit", according to the statement.

Kapustin has links to the far-right and football hooliganism, and previously organised mixed martial arts fighting events and ran a clothing brand called White Rex. Some of his fighters have openly espoused neo-Nazi views.

Russia has declared him a terrorist.

The case bears a resemblance to the one of anti-Kremlin reporter Arkady Babchenko, who hit international headlines in 2018 by faking his own murder in collaboration with Ukrainian authorities.

Kyiv sent shockwaves through Ukraine by announcing that Babchenko had been shot dead at his home in a contract-style killing.

But at a news conference the next day, Babchenko reappeared in person, stunning the world and sparking anger among journalists and press freedom groups across the globe.

Kyiv came under heavy criticism for staging the killing, but insisted that it was the only way to prevent a "real assassination".—AFP

Netanyahu among partygoers at Trump's fete

PALM BEACH: US President Donald Trump hosted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at a glittering New Year's Eve party at his lavish Mar-a-Lago resort on Wednesday, according to social media.

Netanyahu, who arrived at the US president's Palm Beach residence on Monday, was spotted alongside tuxedo-clad Trump Wednesday night in a social media post from conservative influencer Michael Solakiewicz.

Trump had joked that the Israeli leader could attend the party during meetings Monday to discuss the fragile Gaza ceasefire and other regional geopolitical concerns in the Middle East.

The party guest list included Trump's ardent supporters Rudy Giuliani and Emirati billionaire Hussain Sajwani, along with his sons Eric and Don Jr., and top members of his administration, including Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem and White House deputy chief of staff Dan Scavino.

The Gaza ceasefire in October is one of the major achievements of Trump's first year back in power, but some White House officials fear Netanyahu is slow-walking the process.

This week, Trump downplayed reports of tensions with Netanyahu over the second stage of the ceasefire.—AFP

Mamdani sworn in as NYC mayor

Continued from Page 1

team has also organised a block party that it says will enable tens of thousands of people to watch the ceremony at streetside viewing areas along Broadway.

The city's first Muslim mayor and a member of his party's democratic socialist faction, Mamdani was elected last November in a prominent victory that could influence how Democrats approach this year's midterm elections that will determine control of the US Congress.

He inspired a record-breaking turnout of more than two million voters and took 50 per cent of the vote in November, nearly 10 points ahead of Andrew Cuomo running as an independent and well ahead of Republican Curtis Sliwa.

The 34-year-old campaigned heavily on cost-of-living issues and was sharply critical of Republican President Donald Trump, whose approval rating has fallen over the past year amid economic concerns.

The Uganda-born Mamdani has been a sharp critic of Trump on issues such as immigration and said his differences with the president were numerous after a warm White House meeting.

A former state lawmaker, Mr Mamdani promised a freeze on rents and free buses and childcare, building a campaign around affordability issues that some have seen as a path forward for the Democratic Party around the country ahead of November midterm elections.

Dean Fuleihan, the incoming deputy mayor, told the *Financial Times* that Mamdani will move ahead with plans to increase taxes on millionaires to pay for his campaign promises and balance New York's budget.

He added that he doesn't expect rich people to leave the city as a result of potentially higher taxes. New York Governor Kathy Hochul has said she opposes raising personal income taxes but is considering raising corporate taxes to pay for a potential budget shortfall amid federal cuts.

In one early reversal, Mamdani said on Wednesday that he would no longer seek to end mayoral control of New York City's public school system, the largest in the US, naming veteran educator Kamar Samuels as chancellor.

The new job also comes with a change of address as he swaps his rent-controlled apartment in the borough of Queens for Gracie Mansion, the luxurious mayor's residence on Manhattan's Upper East Side.—Agencies

MIRA NAIR (right) and Mahmood Mamdani attend the oath-taking ceremony of their son in New York.—AFP

THIS SUNDAY'S HIGHLIGHTS:

EOS

PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIETY. CULTURE. IDEAS.

COVER: LOSING THE PESHAWAR THAT I ONCE KNEW
Majeed Babar returns to his home in what was once known as the 'City of Flowers' and tries to make sense of its slow erosion, over decades, of culture, tolerance and joy. Where the city once pulsed with music, cinema, dance, poetry and coexistence, it struggles today under the weight of fear, radicalisation and silence. Is the old Peshawar just destined to exist only in his memory?

SPORTS: THE QUIETER, HARDER PATH
The story of the former captain who chose process, patience and conviction to develop the Pak U-19 cricket team that recently won the Under-19 Asia Cup often gets obscured

HISTORY: DEOSAI: LAND OF GIANTS?
Travel writer **Salman Rashid** explains how the plateau's name came, in actuality, from folklore about one single giant rather than a tribe

BOOKS&AUTHORS: Christophe Jaffrelot's *Gujarat Under Modi: Laboratory of Today's India*, R.L. Graham's *Death on the Lusitania*, and Jeremy Renner's *My Next Breath: A Memoir*. ALSO: Mehr Afshan Farooqi on A Century of Nasir Kazmi and Intizar Hussain

PLUS: Nadeem F. Paracha on The Mob and the State, Durriya Kazi on Taking Care of the Little Things, The Saudi-UAE Flare-up in Yemen, Airports as Mirrors of Societies, Vasl Gallery's 'Intimate Resistance', Shazia Hasan's *Painda*, Dr Khwaja Ali Shahid's Gardening, Auntie Agni and Static Cling

ICON

INSIGHT INTO ENTERTAINMENT. PERFORMING ARTS. STYLE. CELEBRITY.

SPOTLIGHT: DO CELEBRITIES STILL NEED JOURNALISTS?
The relationship between journalists and celebrities has always yo-yoed between camaraderie and animosity. Some celebrities now shun journalists as opportunistic and unnecessary for their outreach to the masses. But are journalists really disposable to stars, just because they now have millions of followers on their personal social media pages?

ESSAY: ETERNAL HOUSEHOLD CHORES
Maleeha Hamid Siddiqui on how the reality show *Lazawal Ishq* reveals just how deeply ingrained Pakistani socio-cultural norms about women are

PLUS: Reviews of Huma Shaikh's *Item*, Meesha Shafi and Talwiinder's *Sachay Loki*, Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* A Century On, Brigitte Bardot: Flaws and All, The Grapevine, The Tube and Spotify's Top Pakistani Music

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